Can We Remain Connected in an Ever-Changing Hybrid Environment?

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Hybrid and remote work has become a mainstay since 2020. While there is a desire to be back in the office, there's also a desire to work from home on an ad-hoc basis. Despite negative perceptions of remote work, employees generally work just as effectively at home as they do in the office. This new trend toward an ongoing hybrid work environment allows much more flexibility in the schedules of many employees — but what about staying connected?

As some employees may be entirely remote and others are coming into the office on varying days, it poses the challenge of truly connecting with peers and leaders in the workplace. For those in leadership positions, we want to see our employees reach their full potential. This becomes complicated in a hybrid environment, which is why it's crucial to consider the potential for remote voices to be underrepresented. Leaders have the opportunity to take early action and initiative to avoid this problem. By reaching out for personal conversations, organizing virtual/in-person events and fostering career development, the workplace and work culture can transform.

Here are a few experiences I've had as a leader in a hybrid environment and how I'm taking action:

Make hybrid and remote employees feel included

It can be easy to bypass certain needs of hybrid and remote employees in new working arrangements. The culture in your workplace environment extends outside of the physical office – it also exists in the mentality behind actions.

One way to make hybrid and remote employees feel included in the day-to-day workplace is to ensure constant communication. This means not only having the right communication tools in place but also encouraging leadership to have consistent check-ins with remote employees. At my company, our CEO and I schedule ongoing meetings with remote employees to find out how they are doing and what we could do better to support them as a company. While this is still a new process, we've gotten great feedback about how this makes our employees feel more connected to the organization.

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Creating a company culture that can be conveyed not only in a physical office but remotely as well, should remain a priority going forward. It is important to think about remote employees' experience in events, even down to the little things. For example, sending remote employees gift cards for lunch if there is a lunch meeting in the office or pre-mailing swag before giving them to the in-office employees, can help them feel more connected to the team. My company is based in Maryland, however, over the course of the last two years, we have added many fully remote employees to our team. Doing this offers a variety of benefits, such as allowing employees to balance family needs and offering them flexibility. Having multiple fully remote employees has also become a selling point for us as we are continuing to hire employees who may not be in the Maryland/DC area.

In addition, as a leadership team, we recognized it was important to re-evaluate our mission and values as we continue to grow so much as an organization, expanding physically across the country with a number of remote employees. After conducting an employee survey, we identified that our employees feel even more connected now with our purpose-driven culture than they did prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. That inspiration and altruism are what keep us all excited and connected, no matter where someone is working from.

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Foster career development for remote employees

Many fear that working remotely has the potential to hinder career development by creating a more socially isolated environment. Remote or hybrid employees may need to push themselves to not only represent themselves but also learn and network from peers more frequently. How do we set this group up for success?

For senior leadership, it is important for remote team members to be present on task forces, special projects and initiatives. This allows remote employees to feel included and more connected to both in-office employees and other remote team members.

It’s also important for leadership to model behavior, such as asking remote team members in a meeting for their opinion, asking them if they have questions, not cutting them off when they are speaking and making sure they can contribute effectively in those group hybrid settings. These may seem like small things, but it sets the tone for the meeting and encourages remote team members to participate in the conversation.

When looking to level-up remote employees and ensure remote worker representation is better included in leadership roles, start by building a bench of managers who are remote. While there are pros and cons to having a remote manager, senior leadership can design a remote-friendly role allowing managers to lead both in-office employees and other remote employees.

All remote workers can grow professionally at home through company-provided professional development programs, mentoring programs and an emphasis on career pathing. Additionally, we have a dedicated communications committee with remote team representation to help with technology, tools training and hybrid workforce programs. This ensures remote workers have the correct resources in place to help them succeed.

While there are some challenges, it is possible to remain connected during our ever-changing working environment. Forming a team is one thing, but making it function cohesively is another. With both remote and in-office employees, communication is essential in creating a successful organization. Leaders need to ensure they are incorporating remote workers in the day-to-day workings of an in-office environment.

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